

Sketch

Volume 14, Number 3

1948

Article 12

Duke's Orchestra is an Artist

Don Hayden*

*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1948 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

Duke's Orchestra is an Artist

Don Hayden

Abstract

THERE is no need to interpret the Ellington music. It is simply its own interpretation. Sometimes moody and expressive, sometimes joyously rhythmic, Ellington's music is always logical and yet surprising...

Dukes Orchestra is an Artist

THERE is no need to interpret the Ellington music. It is simply its own interpretation. Sometimes moody and expressive, sometimes joyously rhythmic, Ellington's music is always logical and yet surprising. One always wonders why each step away from the conventional forms had not been taken before. No Ellington creation is fragmentary. Each number is more intricate than a symphony. Yet it is done with all the grace and delicacy of a string quartet.

All present-day jazz has been directly or indirectly influenced by Duke Ellington and his orchestra, but most often it has followed consciously. During at least twenty of the twenty-five to thirty-five years that "musical freedom of speech" (the Duke's words) may be said to have existed, the Duke and his orchestra have led the advance. The many attempts at imitation have been unsuccessful. Why? Imitation is not creation. Most followers have fallen by way of loud fast instrumental tricks, and none has been able to equal or surpass this unique group. Ellington has always been daring but with none of the striving for mere sensationalism or vapid sentimentality apparent in so many of our most popular bands.

Ellington's music is created by men who are individually creative. Individual creativeness, however, is not enough to account for the superb performance which is the band's "rule without exception." There is not domination of the individual by the group, nor domination of the group by any individual—there is complete unification. Such "oneness" is sought by humans in many ways. In modern ballroom dancing the partners attempt perfect unification. A sexual alliance is based on the same hope of achieving unity of expression. The group dances of many nations are a search for submergence of the individual and emergence of unified expression and representation.

Theoretically, unification is achieved in the symphony orchestra by the bending of eighty musical wills into one expression—the expression of the conductor. That single expression is rarely, if ever, attained. Often a symphony, written a century or more before the performance you hear, becomes one man's attempt to force eighty musicians through his interpretation of the composer's creation.

Contrasted to that situation, many of Ellington's arrangements are worked out at rehearsals. Someone states a theme and each man contributes his part to the whole. No notes are recorded on paper until the arrangement is set. There is no attempt to bend the will of any musician. There is no need. Though every man is a virtuoso in his own right, their wills become one; the expression and representation are the same, and the result is musical unity. The orchestra as a whole becomes an artist in its own right.

Some may say that such unity of expression can not be reached in performance after performance because, after all, each member of the band depends on the job for his bread. Some may admit that such heights *may* be reached but that playing to make a living, or environmental pressure, may cause a member to lie down on the job occasionally when he knows the money is as good as his pocket. These people have overlooked an important consideration.

An artist may always refuse to perform, but he will never refuse to do his best at any job he accepts. A portrait painter may refuse to letter a sign, a poet may refuse to write a sentimental story for the slicks, and a musician may refuse to play hill-billy music. But get them to work, and the sign will be lettered as neatly as possible, the slick will carry a better quality of story, and hill-billy music will be in tune for the first time. Every artist feels an inner compulsion to do his best at any time and in any circumstance. The Ellington orchestra is an artist and an artist's strongest drive is toward artistic perfection. An artist will stop short of complete fulfillment only if he reaches a limit of ability or energy. Duke and his orchestra never seem to reach that limit.

However much one may admire those things about the Ellington band that may be recorded with more or less objectivity, the most astounding thing is the emotional outlet such music provides the listener. What emotions? Who knows? Whatever

they are, the music has released and given them expression. I come from an Ellington concert completely at peace with the world. I remember that I have been alternately tense and relaxed. I know that my eyes were wet once or twice during the program; that at times the world was only large enough to hold me and the music. I do not have the slightest idea what emotions caused me to be tense or relaxed. I don't know why my eyes were wet. I know that I have had intense emotional experiences which will not be duplicated until I hear Duke and the orchestra again.

—Don Hayden, Sci. Sr.



in this the place to be

time marches by in small staccato steps
 lifts its feet just off the floor
 forces through with the heel
 points with the toes
i follow in clumsy imitation
and i don't know where i'm going
 and the mirror catches it

the tinny cackle of an old happy motor
rattles out of sight and they are in it
 but i don't know where it's going
 and i don't know where i'm going
 and the mirror catches it
i hear sly laughter and i turn away to look

time slides past in three-four time
 pulls its shoulders down with the beat
 forward . . kick . . stomp
 leap over and cross over
spend the last few days at home
it's worse this way

—Mary Jo Overholt, Sci., Sr.